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Price 70p

Blues' victory ends 35-year wait for trophy



Town's night of cup glory - pictures and report: Pages 54 & 56



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Card gets royal seal of approval

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HUMAN SHIELD WILL DEFEND GYPSY CAMP

Activists join the fight to prevent eviction

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BAILIFFS will face a human shield around Europe's largest illegal gypsy camp on eviction day.

The details emerged this week as more than 40 human-rights activists descended on Dale Farm, in Crays Hill, to decide how to resist the planned £18 million eviction of up to 86 families who live on the site without planning permission.

Supporters decided on Saturday that a peaceful human shield at the entrance to the five-acre Green Belt encampment could be an effective tool in keeping Basildon Borough Council's bailiffs Constant & Co at bay.

Activists also received updates on the training of human-rights monitors, who will be observing the eviction to see if human rights are being respected.

A banner emblazoned with "Constant & Co no pasaran!", the Spanish Civil War slogan meaning "they shall not pass", was later unfurled at the entrance to the site.

Fortify

Meanwhile, the steps that Dale Farm's occupants have taken to fortify their homes also became clear, as evidenced by the masses of barbed wire that now covers fence posts and gates around the site.

Saturday's gathering was held to coincide with Zero Eviction Day, an

event staged to raise awareness of the issues faced by gypsies around the world.

Traveller spokesman Grattan Puxon said: "There are many supporters who are prepared to join in a non-violent human shield."

"This is designed to make the eviction operation as difficult as possible because we feel that the eviction itself is an act of violence against those who just want to continue living in their homes."

Dale Farm resident Richard Sheridan is the president of the Gypsy Council, which supports gypsies throughout Britain.

Speaking on Saturday, he said:

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NO WAY: Travellers and supporters prepare to defend Dale Farm



Flowers herald the dawning of spring

People descend on woods to see bluebells

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ERE can be fewer native plants more charming than the bluebell, the coming of which has, for centuries, heralded the true arrival of spring. Its characteristic colour and sweet-scenting scent may well be ubiquitous across the British countryside, but there can surely be few places where they are quite as spectacular as Norsey Wood.

This is an unspoilt woodland oasis in the outskirts of Billericay and people travel here from miles around to see the plants in their splendour. On Saturday, the Gazette joined in under bright blue skies, keen to see for ourselves the flowers that are such a manifestation of spring as new-born lamb or the first song of the skylark.

Spectacular

Patience Williams, 57, of Outwood Common Road, Billericay, said: "I come here all the time, but I really look forward to this time of year because the bluebells are spectacular."

"You come here in the evening after a long day at work, the perfume is like."

da Stephenson, 49, of Stock Road, Billericay, said: "I have been coming for seven years walking my dog. I don't think the bluebells are as lovely as they were three years ago, but they are still lovely."

He added: "I saw my very first bluebell here about ten days ago."

They will probably peak between Sunday and Easter Sunday and last a good four to five weeks."

The much-anticipated carpet of bluebells with its unmistakable odour has materialised quite yet, with the glorious weather we've been experiencing of late, it must only be a matter of time before the bluebells become even more resolute.



IN BLOOM: The bluebells are out in Norsey Wood

Bluebells

■ THE bluebell is native to the UK; about half of the world's population of the flowers is found within our shores.

■ Bluebells can also be white or pink.

■ They prefer moist and shady conditions, hence their prevalence in woodland habitats.

■ It is illegal to dig up bluebell bulbs from the wild to sell them.

■ The Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson believed that bluebell juice could be used to cure snake-bites.



INCREDIBLE: Patience Williams, 57, of Outwood Common Road, Billericay

Views: Should the council use outside consultants?

Gazette comment

If ministers don't get a grip now, this problem will just go on and on.

■ WHEN Abbie Nisbett sent a letter to Prince William congratulating him on his forthcoming wedding, she couldn't have been expecting the reply she got.

While most people might hope for a standard boilerplate response, what she received from St James's Palace was a cut above the stock

Brentwood Council's decision to hire consultants to carry out certain tasks at the town hall has apparently saved taxpayers £3.1 million in three years.

We hit Brentwood High Street to see if people welcomed outsider help or would rather have full-time staff.



Diane Thorne, 47, of Brentwood, said: "If it is better for us and our council tax why not."

"It's all about saving money."



Bill Ottaway, 76, of Hanging Hill Lane in Hutton, offered his own services.

He said: "Give them my number. I had a business for 21 years and could run the council better."



Frank Nicholas, 71, of Harold Wood, said: "What invariably happens is they

Shield vow as travellers prepare to defend site

From front

"We feel very comfortable with the support that people are giving us today."

"There are people here taking the adult approach in the 21st century."

"I am a British citizen and I am glad that we are finally getting a little bit of respect."

Mr Sheridan stressed he did not want any anarchists coming to Dale Farm to cause trouble, should an eviction go ahead.

"The pen is mightier than the sword," he told the Gazette.

Mr Sheridan also said that allowing families to stay at Dale Farm could save the British taxpayer up to £200 million over the next decade.

Pointing to a report prepared by the Commission for Racial Equality in 2005, he said: "Keeping gypsies on the road costs £20 million a year with the new 20 per cent VAT."

"I am hoping to save the taxpayers of this country £200 million over the next ten years."

As supporters of Dale Farm talked through their next moves, resident Nora McCarthy, 31, said: "It is nice to know that we have the support."

"I hope this will make the council listen."

Basildon Borough Council has consistently stressed that it is not anti-Gypsy and that it is clearing the site solely to rectify breaches of planning law.

The council has set aside up to £8m to pay for its part of the operation, although it has yet to serve the travellers with an order giving them 28 days' notice of any forthcoming eviction.

Essex police is currently in the process of applying for £10m from the Government to pay for its role in the eviction.

■ Tune into Phoenix 98 FM for the Gazette Show at 7pm tonight for a debate between Basildon Borough Council and representatives of Dale Farm.